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ABSTRACT

This chapter is part of a book that recounts the year's work at the Early Childhood Development Center (ECDC) at Texas A & M University-Corpus Christi. Rather than an "elitist" laboratory school for the children of university faculty, the dual-language ECDC is a collaboration between the Corpus Christi Independent School District and the university, with an enrollment representative of Corpus Christi's population. The chapter details a study, involving parents and grandparents of children at the ECDC and another district school (Zavala Elementary), which examined the effect of parent literature choices on the second-language literacy learning of children involved in dual-language and immersion programs. Findings showed that parents at both the more Spanish-dominant Zavala school and the ECDC selected English-language books to read to their children, although their reasons differed. Zavala parents valued the academic and economic role of English, while ECDC parents often could not read Spanish-language books. (Contains 8 references and lists 13 children's books.) (EV)

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Chapter 6

Book Choices for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CLD) Parents: Strategies for Sharing Books in Bilingual Homes

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Introduction

Learning to read and write is essential for all children's school success. The acquisition of literacy skills is particularly essential for second language learners from minority backgrounds as they grapple with an education provided in their second, and weakest, language. For majority group children learning a minority language as their second language, literacy can become the key to understanding a new language system. Although skills in literacy develop throughout a child's school career, the early years of literacy learning are uniquely important. Successive years in school provide increasing levels of learning dependent on literacy skills. If children don't develop a love for reading and associate pleasure in reading in their early years, they are less likely to elect literacy activities when given academic choices when they are older.

During the early years of school, parents are essential in helping children develop positive associations with literature. In dual language and language immersion programs, where both minority and majority group children are learning a second language, the literature choices parents make can send a clear message to children. It is a documented phenomenon that culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) families lose their original languages within the first few generations of arriving in the United States. How does this affect literacy growth in both languages for their children? When English speaking families include their children in immersion programs in order to foster second language learning for their children, how do their literacy practices in the home affect their children's language learning? This chapter examines the effect of parent literature choice on second language literacy learning for children involved in dual language and immersion programs.

Background

In dual language programs, both majority English language speakers and minority language speakers (for example those students who speak Spanish as their first language) are expected to use each of their languages in the classroom (Lessow-Hurley, 1996). Ideally, each language is used for oral and written communication because the dynamics of language production vary with each individual learner.

Dual language instruction differs from other bilingual teaching in several ways. Instruction in a dual language program always involves daily language experiences in each language (Meza-Zaragosa, 1998). Virtually every child is a minority speaker at some point during the instructional day. This presents teachable moments when teachers facilitate the creation of meaning for second language learners of both English and Spanish. When both languages are also valued in the home, children encounter greater success in language learning and less social hesitation in second language use (Montague & Meza-Zaragosa, 2000.) This confidence becomes essential for children to find success in second language learning.

There is a difference between dual language and other bilingual education programs with respect to the social dynamics of language use and status. In transition and maintenance bilingual classrooms that do not use a dual language approach to instruction, the focus is on the language minority children who must strive to learn the majority language. With a dual language approach, the social and academic dynamics of language use involve both language majority and minority learners. With this program, children are expected to operate in both their strongest and their weakest language each day. In most dual language schools, the minority and majority speakers are grouped together so each linguistic group can benefit from the other's language. An immersion program is another form of enrichment bilingual education. The difference between dual language programs and immersion programs lies in their population. A dual language program should have 50% of the student population from each language group (Montague, 1997).

An immersion program, while following many of the same curriculum delivery strategies found in dual language programs, would effectively immerse English-speaking children in a curriculum that includes about 50% of the instruction in another language. This model usually occurs in the absence of a 50% representation of minority children in the program. In any bilingual program, students benefit from the validation of having their home culture and language enter the classroom (Ada & Smith, 1998; Bailey, 1998; Montague, 1997; Quintero, 1998).

In dual language and immersion programs, early literacy learning is essential to school success (Montague, 1998). It is important, too, that school programs are supported in children's homes. Parents have a major influence on early literacy development in young children

(Ada & Smith, 1998). Parents are the first educators of their children. What is valued in the home often translates to what is valued by the child. This includes the importance placed on reading and developing literacy as well as the value of each language in the home.

Methodology

Participants

The participants in this study were parents or grandparents of children enrolled in two dual language programs. The participants were surveyed at an evening meeting of a parent/teacher association. Both monolingual English-speaking parents and bilingual parents were involved in the study. The minority language spoken by parents was Spanish. The study took place in two elementary schools: Zavala Elementary (n=26) and the Early Childhood Development Center (n=16). Both schools are part of the Corpus Christi Independent School District. The Early Childhood Development Center (ECDC) is also a laboratory school situated on the campus of Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi (TAMUCC).

Procedures

Parents were asked individually to complete an oral survey with a university faculty member. Participants could respond in English or Spanish. Figure 1 presents a copy of the survey. After completing the questions, parents were asked to look at several books and choose which two they would like to read aloud to their child.

Figure 1 Parent survey

Book titles are listed in Figure 2. Three books had Spanish-only text; three had English-only text. Two books were available in both English and Spanish versions. After indicating their book choices, parents were able to choose a book to take home.

___ Mother ___ Father ___Grandparent ___ Other

Grade level of student(s) _____

How many languages do you speak?

___1 ___2 ___ Other

What are they? ___English ___ Spanish ___ Other

How many languages do you read and write?

___1 ___2 ___ Other

What are they?

___ English ___ Spanish ___ Other

What language do you use when you speak to your children?

___ English ___ Spanish ___ Other

How many hours a day does your child spend with you?

___ Hours

Do you read to your child?

___Yes ___No ___ Other (sometimes)

If yes:

How often? _____

How much time do you spend reading to your child? _____

What languages(s) do you read to your child in? _____

Figure 2 Books offered to parents

Dual language
- *Moon Rope* (Ehlert, 1992)
- *Clifford y los Ositos* (Bridwell, 1999)
- *Gathering the Sun* (Ada, 1997)

Spanish Only
- *Tomas y la Senora de la Biblioteca* (Mora, 1997)
- *Juguemos al Futbol* (Blackstone, 1999)
- *Alexander, Que Era Rico el Domingo Pasado* (Viorst, 1989)

English only
- *The Seven Chinese Brothers* (Mahy, 1990)
- *The Hat* (Brett, 1997)
- *Whistle for Willie* (Keats, 1964)

Spanish or English
- *Chato's Kitchen* (Soto & Guevara, 1995)
- *Chato y su Cena* (Soto & Guevara, 1997)
- *Goodnight Moon* (Brown, 1975)
- *Buenas Noches, Luna* (Brown, 1997)

Results

The results reflected differences in the two schools surveyed (See Figure 3). Though both schools strive to achieve a balanced population of 50% Spanish-dominant and 50% English-dominant families, Zavala Elementary draws students from more Spanish language families. The ECDC, on the other hand, is required to recruit from both groups. ECDC administrators have stated that it is slightly more difficult to find and recruit Spanish-speaking families because of the island location of the school and the need to transport all students to the school site.

The parents surveyed at Zavala Elementary were either bilingual or Spanish-monolingual speakers. The nature of the group may have been influenced by the fact that the study took place during a parent event conducted in Spanish. Surprisingly, however, nearly one-third (30%) of the books selected by this group were in English. These parents commented during the survey interviews that they do everything they can to learn English and to make sure their children learn English.

English is seen as the language of academic and economic success by these parents. They stated that their children could find

better jobs than they themselves had because the children would be bilingual. The parents strongly supported English language learning. The parents were proud of the bilingual program at the school, however, and valued preservation of their children's Spanish skills. When asked why they selected English language books, the parents explained that they planned to read the Spanish book to their children and let the children read the English book to them.

More parents at the ECDC selected English over Spanish books; 33% selected English and 14% selected Spanish. This finding may reflect the parents' confidence in being able to read a book in their native language to their children. Many of the parents surveyed were English-monolingual speakers. Several parents stated that they wished they could read a book in Spanish, but were unable to do so, even to their children. This choice may also reflect a security in language dominance of the dominant language in this society. Because these parents had enrolled their children in a dual language school, they clearly wanted to increase their children's abilities in two languages. However, many parents seemed to view Spanish instruction as being the responsibility of the school, not the home. During the brief interview sessions, English-speaking parents made comments such as "I wish I could read one of those to my kids, but there's no way" (personal communication, February, 2001).

Figure 3
Parent choices by school

Book title	Zavala Elementary	ECDC
Moon Rope	1	1
Clifford y los Ositos	8	4
Gathering the Sun	5	2
Tomas y la Senora de la Biblioteca	5	2
Juguemos al Football	5	1
Alexander, Que Era Rico el Domingo Pasado	2	2
The Seven Chinese Brothers	5	4
The Hat	9	6
Whistle for Willie	2	2
Chato's Kitchen	3	2
Chato y su Cena	1	2
Goodnight Moon	0	6
Buenas Noches, Luna	6	2

Limitations

Limitations to this study include the fact that parents elected to participate. In order to conduct the study, the researchers were limited to those parents who attended an evening meeting; this eliminated parents who might not be able to attend because of work schedules, transportation issues, and childcare needs. In addition, several parents chose not to participate as a result of time limitations and personal choice. The sample may reflect only parents who were highly involved in their children's literacy experiences. The offer of a free book in either language may have served as an incentive to otherwise rushed parents who wanted to secure books for their children. In several instances, children who were present prompted their parents and grandparents to participant in order to receive the free book. This may have limited the sample by including an overabundance of parents who allow their children to make choices.

Conclusions

Parent choice in the home literacy experience has an important impact on children's independent literacy choices. Many bilingual educators support the position that it is much easier to teach two languages to children whose parents place equal value on both languages. Such messages from home are picked up by even the youngest of children. Any quality dual language or immersion program includes literacy instruction in each language for all of the children enrolled. Such instruction is facilitated in the home by literacy choices made by children's first teachers: their parents.

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